

## Maintaining Attention

A critical psychological element of exerting influence is first gaining the audience's attention. The factors listed below describe the things to which people tend to give attention. You can use these elements in your introduction to gain attention and throughout your message to hold attention.

This material is largely taken from Ehninger, Douglas, et al. *Principles and Types of Speech Communication*. 9<sup>th</sup> Ed. Glenview, IL: Scott, Foresman and Co., 1986.

### Contents

[A. Gaining and Holding Attention: A List of Factors](#)

[B. Holding Attention: Additional Factors](#)

#### A. Gaining and Holding Attention: A List of Factors

The following stimuli gain attention:

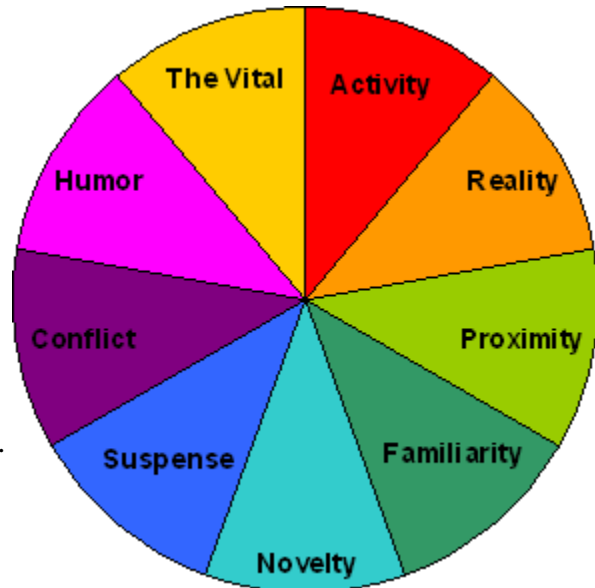
##### 1. Activity.

- a. Things that move, flash, blink.
- b. Emergency vehicle lights. Mechanical billboards.
- c. A message can “move” through a process or history.

##### 2. Reality.

- a. Real, concrete, sensual things are more attention-getting than hypothetical, abstract or mental.
- b. Use concrete words and images
  - i. Abstract: When you move to a new town, you don't know where anything is.
  - ii. Better: When you move to a new town, you don't know where the grocery store is.
  - iii. Concrete: When you move to a new town, you don't know where the Bi-Lo is.
- c. Create “presence.”

##### 3. Proximity.



- a. People pay more attention to things that are near to them than things that are far away.
- b. Think of what news stories get your attention.
- c. Refer to things that are recent, immediate or nearby.
- d. Refer to things that preceded your message—the previous speaker.
- e. Refer to someone in the audience.

#### **4. Familiarity.**

- a. People pay more attention to things that are familiar.
- b. Think of what gets your attention when you overhear a conversation in a restaurant.
- c. Draw from what people know.
- d. Draw from things that are unique or special to them. When the prominent 19<sup>th</sup> century motivational speaker, Russell Conwell, came into a new town to give his famous speech, “Acres of Diamonds,” he would first search out local stories to add to his presentation.

#### **5. Novelty.**

- a. People pay attention to things that are new and different.
- b. Think of the Chik-fil-a billboards.
- c. Use new or unusual information to get attention.
- d. Geraldine Ferraro compared the earnings of men and women:
  - i. I wanted to find out how many women in America earn more than \$60,000 a year. I picked that number, frankly, because that is what I, as a member of Congress, earn. I learned that there are only 18,000 women in the entire United States, working full-time, who earn more than \$60,000. We represent just one-tenth of one percent of all the women who work full-time in America. By contrast, 885,000 men, 2.1 percent of full-time male workers, are in the \$60,000 plus bracket.

#### **6. Suspense.**

- a. People pay attention to things that build suspense.
- b. The apartment billboard campaign featuring messages to the “Women in yellow.”
- c. The classic horror movie.
- d. When you use suspense, observe two cautions:
  - i. Do not make the information seem so difficult or mysterious that your listeners lose all hope of comprehending it; and
  - ii. make sure that the information you finally reveal is important enough to warrant the suspense you have created. Audiences become irritated when a speaker promises “more about that later” and then either never gets to the point again or says little of value when he does arrive at the point.

#### **7. Conflict.**

- a. People pay attention to a good fight.
- b. "Freedom and fear are at war. The advance of human freedom, the great achievement of our time and the great hope of every time, now depends on us." [President George W. Bush addressing a joint session of Congress, September 20, 2001.](#)
- c. The hype surrounding boxing. Many TV drama plots.
- d. An introduction or even the entire presentation can feature conflict.
- e. Be accurate. Avoid the "straw man" fallacy: creating a false statement of your opponent's position that can be easily refuted.

#### **8. Humor.**

- a. People pay attention to things that are funny.
- b. Be relevant. Beware of wandering from the point under discussion. Jokes and anecdotes must reinforce rather than divert attention from the central ideas or claims.
- c. Use good taste. Avoid humor on occasions where it would be out of place, and refrain from using risqué and ethnic humor that may offend your listeners and detract from the effectiveness of your presentation.

#### **9. The vital.**

- a. People nearly always pay attention to matters that affect their health, reputation, property, or employment.
- b. Show that your topic is critical to your audience's interests.

### **B. Holding Attention: Additional Factors**

In addition to the factors above, use the following to hold attention:

#### **1. Diversity.**

- a. Individual members of the audience will vary in their responsiveness to the factors of attention. With this in mind, you should use a variety of factors in your presentation. In addition, audience members are capable of responding to more than one factor; multiple use will increase the chances of their concentration on your message.

#### **2. Utility.**

- a. As the discussion of the vital suggests, audiences will attend to those events that seem to have usefulness for them. By pointing to the utility of the ideas being presented, and being specific about how and why the audience can benefit from your message, you will increase the chances of keeping their attention.

#### **3. Similarity.**

- a. Ideas that appear to be logically related or similar to one another are easier for an audience to attend to. A disjointed, random collection of disparate ideas may soon leave an audience thinking about more useful things. The more an audience can economize by linking thoughts together, the easier it will be for them to maintain their overall attention to your message.

#### **4. Cueing.**

- a. Attention researchers Eleanor Gibson and Nancy Rader point out in their discussion of the advantages of preparedness that “One can be more attentive as he knows what to expect and what to look for.” Cueing the audience, or preparing them for what they should expect, can be gained by forecasting and by transitions.
- b. Forecasting simply tells the audience what the major divisions of the speech will be: “First, I will review the two primary reasons for the increase in the Great White sharks, then I will discuss the major effects of their presence in the area known as the Red Triangle.” When used as part of the introduction, forecasting gives the audience an overview of the entire speech and allows them to anticipate major divisions.
- c. Transitions function as verbal “signposts” indicating the next major point in the speech: “With this brief history as a basis, let us next consider the current scene”; “An even more important consideration is . . . , “Moving on to the second of my three alternatives. . . .”
- d. [See the notes on transitions for more information.](#)